Be a Good Listener

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Being a good listener when a friend or loved one discloses a difficult or upsetting experience can be very important. We know that respectful, compassionate, attentive, and authentic listening can be healing, while controlling, blaming, and/or invalidating responding can cause harm.

Response to Disclosure Matters

Interpersonal and institutional violence is harmful. Sexual assault and sexual harassment is harmful. It is important to understand that how we respond to disclosures of violence is crucial. A bad response to a sexual violence disclosure is an additional injury. The bad response can exacerbate the damage. A bad response is likely to be a new betrayal trauma. A bad response from an institution is institutional betrayal. We must hold individuals and institutions responsible for both sexual and other violence *and* how they respond to disclosures.

In collaboration with Lean In Foundation we created discussion guides for talking about sexual harassment:

- https://leanin.org/meeting-guides/how-to-talk-about-sexual-harassment/
- https://leanin.org/meeting-guides/self-care-after-sexual-harassment/
- Also available with additional resources here: https://leanin.org/sexual-harassment/

Response to Current Allegations of Sexual Harassment and Assault (November 2017)

Every day now in the news, we learn of various actions taken by those facing allegations of sexual assault and harassment -- from Donald Trump to Harvey Weinstein and Louie CK to Roy Moore and Al Franken. One set of actions has to do with their reported sexual harassment and/or assaults. Another set of actions has to do with how they respond when accused. Both types are crucially important.

While it's true that a reasonably good response does not remove responsibility for sexual violence, a bad response is a whole new injury. A good response can at least do some good (sincere apologies can be healing). But a bad response not only exacerbates the harm of the first injury, it also inflicts new injury, and does so in ways that are usually public and ongoing (well past the media moving on).

While we may not be sure about the truth of the allegations, we can be sure about how such public figures are responding to the allegations.

In addition, it's critical to consider the way that institutions around these men respond -- with again, the potentials for profound healing or profound harm. There can be institutional betrayal or institutional courage.

It's critical that we make these distinctions about response, for many reasons. One is to create a space for people to apologize sincerely and also be accepted for that sincere apology -- no, not let off the hook for the sexual violence, but yes, acknowledged for the apology when it is sincere.

Other key reasons have to do with the potential negative impacts of swift condemnation and lasting banishment for those who actually do apologize. First, such treatment can deter others from making genuine apologies. Second, it can reduce perpetrators' motivations and abilities to attempt to heal the harms they've caused to individuals, institutions, and communities.

And not only can shutting down apologies do significant harm to survivors, but it can -- and very likely will -- fuel a powerful backlash to the courageous truth telling we are witnessing.

Thus it's critical that we not confuse the harm of bad responses to allegations with the harm of the sexual assault and harassment. Both are crucial, and must be understood for what they are and what impacts they have.

First, do Not DARVO and Call it out When you See it

DARVO stands for "Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender." The perpetrator or offender may Deny the behavior, Attack the individual doing the confronting, and Reverse the roles of Victim and Offender. DARVO is a particularly pernicious response to disclosure and can cause harm. For more on DARVO see this page.

South Park 90-second DARVO Explainer, 7 November 2019.

Some Guidelines for the Well-Intentioned Listener

Many people want to respond well to a disclosure but may not know how. The suggestions compiled here are intended to provide some guidelines to help people and institutions respond well to disclosures of violence and distressing events.

These suggestions are drawn from research findings-- see for example, Ullman, S. E. and Peter-Hagene, L. (2014), Social Reactions To Sexual Assault Disclosure, Coping, Perceived Control, And Ptsd Symptoms In Sexual Assault Victims. J. Community Psychol., 42: 495–508. doi: 10.1002/jcop.21624. Also these suggestions are drawn from Freyd & Birrell (2013), Blind to Betrayal.

- Respect the survivor's autonomy and strengths
- Validate the survivor and indicate responsibility of violence is with the perpetrator(s)
- Stay engaged and focused on survivor's needs and validate the survivor's strengths
- When it is possible and appropriate, sincerely apologize
- Do *not* invalidate or blame or pathologize the survivor
- Do *not* take away the survivor's autonomy

Some more specific suggestions for Compassionate Listening

These suggestions are drawn from instructions that address listening skills in the moment -- these instructions were used in a study by: Foynes, M.M. & Freyd, J.J. (2011). The Impact of Skills Training on Responses to the Disclosure of Mistreatment. *Psychology of Violence*, 1, 66-77. The particular wording of these instructions was designed to match a control condition in our study. (See http://dynamic.uoregon.edu/jjf/disclosure/ for the specific experimental and control materials.)

First, it is important to utilize attentive body language.

1. Do not make inappropriate facial expressions (Examples: smiling when someone is discussing a sad topic, rolling eyes, raising eyebrows when hearing how someone coped) and do not move your body too much (Examples: excessive fidgeting, playing with cell phone).
2. Do sit in a posture (leaning forward or upright) and use gestures that convey engagement (nodding).
3. Do maintain consistent, not constant or darting, eye contact (look directly at the person for brief periods of 3-6 seconds, then look away briefly before reconnecting).

Second, it is important to use verbal skills that encourage the speaker to continue.

1. Do *not* change the topic or ask questions that are off-topic. This may seem like a way to decrease your anxiety or make the other person more comfortable, but it often has the opposite effect.
2. *Do* allow silence and convey that you are listening by using encouraging words like "hmmm" and "uh-huh" periodically.
3. *Do* state/name/reflect back the emotion being described. It might also help you to imagine yourself in the speaker's place and look at the situation from his/her perspective. (Examples: "Wow - sounds like it was scary for you." "It seems like you feel really sad about that." "I feel like that must've made you angry.")
4. *Do* ask questions if you are confused, and try to ask questions that require more than one word (Instead of: "Was that scary?" "Do you mean it wasn't that bad?" Ask questions like: "Could you tell me a little bit more about that?" "What was that like for you?" "What do you mean when you say ____?")

Third, it is important to use words in a way that convey support.

1. Do *not* reassure the person in a way that might minimize their experience (Examples: "That happened so long ago, maybe it would help to try move on." "It's not worth the energy to keep thinking about it." "Don't be scared.")
2. Do *not* make judgments or evaluations about their responses or decisions (Examples: "Couldn't you do/say _____ instead?" "I don't think you should worry about it anymore." "I think it'd be better for you to _____." "Why don't you ____?")
3. *Do* validate the person's emotions in a genuine tone (Examples: "If that happened to me, I can imagine I'd feel really overwhelmed too." "Given that experience, it makes sense you'd feel/say/do _____." "I think many people with that experience would have felt similarly.")
4. *Do* point out the person's strengths (Examples: "I'm amazed at how much courage that took." "You've done a great job at keeping everything in perspective." "I really admire your strength." "I'm impressed with how you've dealt with this.")

5. *Do* focus on their experience rather than your own and only give advice when it is requested.

Also See

- Our Disclosure Research -- List of Articles
- Our Listening Skills Research and Resources
- Additional suggestions for listening are described in Chapters 10-12 of Freyd & Birrell Blind to Betrayal.
- Foynes, M.M. & Freyd, J.J. (2011). The Impact of Skills Training on Responses to the Disclosure of Mistreatment. *Psychology of Violence*, 1, 66-77.
- Compelled Disclosure: "Required Reporting" Resources
- About DARVO (Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender)
- About Institutional Betrayal and Institutional Courage
- APA Shortened Version of this page: Freyd, J.J. (2017). How to Listen When Someone You Know Discloses Sexual Harassment or Assault. *PI, the American Psychological Association, Public Interest Blog*, 22 November 2017.
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